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Chapter 1

Below the Radar: community groups and activities in context

Angus McCabe and Jenny Phillimore

Chapter Aims

This chapter addresses:

- Definitions of below the radar community groups and activities.
- The size and scope of informal and semi-formal community activity.
- The contested nature of concepts of 'below the radar'.

Background

Interest in small scale, 'below the radar', community groups and activities has grown in recent times and cuts across a wide range of policy concerns: from the engagement of Black and Minority Ethnic community organisations in community cohesion agendas and combating violent extremism, through to the commissioning of public services at the local level, supporting grass roots community economic development in excluded neighbourhoods as well as the involvement of community based organisations in modernising local governance, community safety, asset management, health and wellbeing.

Under New Labour administrations it is possible to identify two key strands to policy relating to small scale community groups. Firstly, the expectation that such groups, along with the wider voluntary sector, would take on a greater responsibility for the delivery of public services (Home Office 2004) or the management of previously public sector assets (Quirk 2007). Secondly, their role in promoting active citizenship, addressing 'democratic deficit' and (re)engagement of citizens in democratic processes (Mayo *et al* 2013).

These developments coincided with a series of investments in small organisations or, indeed, individuals to develop their capacity to engage in policy and service delivery including, for example, the Active Learning for Active Citizenship programme, Community Empowerment Networks and subsequently Regional Empowerment Partnerships. In this context:

'A healthy community sector is critical for the sustainability of local communities. It is not an end in itself. It helps deliver social capital, social cohesion and democratic participation. Better public investment in the [voluntary and community] sector will result in a better quality of life for local people and local communities, partly through their own direct activities and partly through their interaction with public services.' (CLG, 2007, p.1)

Under the Coalition and subsequent Conservative administrations, this interest has been sustained in the short lived 'Big Society' and, subsequently the Localism Act of 2011— albeit with both a changed language (from community engagement to social action for example) and substantially less resource. Further, the emphasis has shifted: citizens, and groups of citizens, are to be managers of, and volunteers in, what had been public services (e.g. libraries) rather than influencing the configuration of those services.

Beyond official government policy there has also been a growing interest in community, or resident led, change. This has ranged from the adoption of asset based community development approaches in the promotion of health and wellbeing (Glasgow Centre for Population Health undated), the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's programme of light touch initiative of support for community groups involved in neighbourhood regeneration (Taylor *et al* 2007) and the Big Local programme of resident led change in England (NCVO *et al* 2015). The wider policy context in which below the radar groups operate is explored in more detail in chapters five and six.

Defining 'below the radar'

'The phrase under the radar is ungainly, but is the best available terminology for those organisations which are not included in the main national registers. The term is often associated with small community organisations which are not large enough to register with the Charity Commission or Companies House and are perhaps associated more closely with community building and participation than with service delivery. However, many very small organisations do register and so suggestions that the under the radar segment of the sector is synonymous with smaller charities can be misleading' (OTS 2008 p2)

The phrase below, or under, the radar (BTR) is often used to describe small, community based organisations and activities in the UK. There are a number of ways of conceptualising the term. Strictly interpreted, it refers to groups that do not have a recognised legal status and are not, therefore, on the Charity Commission or other regulatory registers. Indeed NESTA (Marcus and Tidey 2015 p.10) take an even wider definition in that *'below the radar is taken to mean [any] network of unrecorded social activity.'*

Consideration of legal status has dominated understandings of under or below the radar (BTR) in the literature. For example MacGillivray *et al.* (2001) use the term BTR to refer to those groups or activities that are 'unregulated', 'semi-formal', associations and, therefore, do not appear in official databases. While it could be argued that this legal or regulatory approach is appropriate for some parts of the sector, many very small operations do register in some way, so that they are able to access funds from grant making trusts (Zetter *et al.*, 2005; Phillimore *et al.*, 2009; Phillimore and Goodson, 2009).

The over-reliance upon legalistic and financial definitions of 'below the radar' has been acknowledged (OTS 2008). Accordingly, some commentators argue that very small registered organisations and activities may operate under a financial, rather than regulatory, radar. There is no consensus about the threshold of income that leaves activities under the financial radar. NCVO describes charities with incomes of less than £10,000 per annum as 'micro charities' (NCVO, 2009). Further, in a study of resilience in charities using an analysis of the Scottish Charity Register (McCrae and Nowak, 2010) found that 80% of organisations on the Register had incomes of less than £25,000 per annum and that the majority of these were 'micro-groups' with annual turnovers of less than £2,000.

Thompson (2008), researching BTR third sector groups working with children and families, identified two funding thresholds; organisations with funding less than £250,000, which are small, relative to the big children's charities; and 'smaller' under the radar organisations with income of less than £50,000 per year.

Alternatively CEFET (2007) use an annual income of £35,000 to define 'grass-roots or street level' organisations when researching European Union supported social inclusion projects. This level of finance was, they argue, unlikely to support more than one worker, meaning that these small groups were likely to be managed from within excluded communities. Such levels of funding were likely to leave groups with limited capacity to work beyond their immediate area, or secure longer-term 'sustainable' income streams.

MacGillivray *et al.* (2001) do not identify any maximum annual income levels associated with being under the radar preferring instead to stress the lack of dependable funding of any significance. This, however, ignores organisations which may hold substantial capital assets for example tenants or village halls, but limited annual revenues. Others may have annual turnovers of over £50,000, or even £250,000, generated through trading activity such as community centres with bars or room hire facilities, but employ no full time or professional staff. The majority of such groups are likely to fall under a support definition of under the radar, with incomes of less than £10,000 per annum that are largely self-generated (Community Matters/LGA, 2006). Similarly, although the existence of a distinctive Black and Minority Ethnic third sector is contested (see Chapters nine and thirteen), research in this area demonstrates that it is dominated by small organisations and semi-formalised activities. A combination of low incomes and irregular funding therefore placed most migrant and refugee community organisations (MRCOs) 'below the radar' whether registered or not (Zetter *et al.*, 2005; Phillimore *et al.*, 2009).

Closely related to the issue of finance, other commentators have noted the absence of capital resources in BTR activities (NCVO, 2009). Micro activities or organisations often have no regular premises or full-time or permanent staff, use of volunteers' homes or donated spaces (MacGillivray *et al.* 2001) - a situation that is particularly mirrored in small refugee and migrant organisations (Zetter *et al.*, 2005; Phillimore *et al.* 2009).

Other forms of radar that small community groups fall below include:

- a support, funding or capacity building radar where activities do not receive any kind of resource from the state or network organisations such as Local Development Agencies
- a policy radar where organisations or activists are not engaged in any kind of policy agenda either because they have not been recognised or credited with any role or have elected to remain outside this particular radar
- an influence radar where despite a desire to influence policy or provision they are unable to bring their concerns to notice.

Finally, in an information age, community groups may also be below technological radars: those without websites and who do not have a presence on social media (Harris and McCabe 2016).

Once definitions of below the radar groups move beyond purely legalistic terms of reference, the boundaries become 'fuzzy'. What is being researched, or discussed in the policy literature, are 'micro-charities', small scale co-operatives and social enterprises as well as unregulated groups. Such a 'loose and baggy' approach may therefore raise questions over the usefulness of the term in understanding small scale civil society actions, although it is an issue which also plagues research into the voluntary sector as a whole (Kendall and Knapp 2005).

The scale of 'below the radar' activity

Little is known about the exact extent of small voluntary, community or below the radar activity. Discussing the rural voluntary sector Blackburn *et al.* (2003) note the absence of a detailed knowledge about, and therefore the need to map the extent, scale and nature of, micro voluntary organisations and community groups in rural areas. Looking at infra-structure development needs in Greater Manchester, where mapping has taken place, Martikke and Tramonti (2005) note there is still no authoritative list of services and question whether there can be such a list, given the diversity of the sector. A lack of understanding of the extent and workings of civil society organisations, particularly within smaller/more recently arrived communities, is a recurrent theme particularly in the literature on civil society within recently arrived communities (CLG 2009).

This lack of knowledge about the nature and extent of BTR activity is not just a UK phenomenon. In the USA Holland and Ritvo (2008) argue that the majority of third sector organisations are not on the Internal Revenue Service records and are not legally constituted. Toepler (2003) suggests that over 70% of US VCOs are very small organisations of which only 30% were registered.

This situation is neatly summarised by Toepler (2003) who concludes that:

'perhaps one of the few remaining big mysteries in non-profit sector research is the question of what we are missing by excluding those organisations from empirical investigations that are not easily captured in standard data sources' (p.236)

In terms of measuring, or quantifying, the third sector there are 161,300 registered charities in the UK (Kane *et al* 2015), with a further 10,000 community interest companies (ORCIC 2008) and 6,796 co-operatives (Co-operatives UK, 2015). Beyond this there are estimates of the number of non-profit enterprises with social goals (based on data held by Companies House) of 6,700 and for exempted charities of between 3,490 and 5,091 (NCVO, 2009). In total, therefore, there are just over 200,000 third sector organisations that are known to, regulatory bodies. An additional 127,000 sports and recreational groups might also be considered as part of the mainstream sector (Sport England, 2002).

Once the wider term of civil society is applied it becomes far more difficult to quantify in robust statistical terms. MacGillivray *et al.* (2001) argue there are more than 900,000 micro-organisations in the UK. The New Economics Foundation suggest there are between 600,000 and 900,000 (cited in NCVO, 2009/Kane *et al* 2015) and NCVO consistently estimate that there are some 870,000 'civil society' organisations. However, over at least the last decade, the various NCVO Almanacs note that the quality of data on informal community organisations is poor. Further, profiles of community action do not, as of yet, include or quantify virtual/on line actions associated with new social movements (Della Porta and Diani, 1999; Harris and McCabe 2016).

Depending on which estimate is accepted these figures suggest that small community organisations are some three to five times greater in number than the 'mainstream', registered and regulated, voluntary sector. Yet, as noted, comparatively little is known about the definition, scale, or

functioning of this part of the sector. This despite the assumptions that small community groups and activities can address a wide range of policy concerns and agendas.

The nature of below the radar activity

Academic research into the third sector is a relatively recent phenomenon in the UK and beyond. Archambault (1997) describes the voluntary sector in France as 'terra incognita'. While American authors (Minkler, 2005; Holland and Ritvo, 2008) have commented on the lack of systematic and longitudinal research into voluntary, never mind community, organisations. The first major studies on scope, definitions and typology emerged in the early to mid-1990s (Salamon and Anheier, 1997; Kendall and Knapp, 1996). International and comparative literature is also in its relative infancy (Barbetta 1997) and research into BTR even less developed. Most publications focus upon the formal service delivery part of the sector, and the larger agencies with capacity to formally provide services (Kendall, 2003; Milbourne 2013). Research on BTR is most likely to appear in the community development literature (Ledwith, 2005; Craig *et al.*, 2008) and to focus upon contested concepts of community and models of working with communities, rather than 'below the radar' community organisations themselves (Banks *et al.*, 2003; Gilchrist, 2009). Substantive research into BTR activity is underdeveloped and relies heavily on anecdote and received wisdom rather than, necessarily, rigorous evidence.

However, surveys of small scale community activity to date (RAWM undated, Robinson and Chapman 2013, Soteri Proctor 2011) suggest an extremely diverse 'sector'. The focus may be self-help around particular health care and support needs through to short-life community campaigns on, for example, environmental improvements. Activities can range from:

- arts and sports groups through to informal finance arrangements (for example the Pardoners and Committee schemes within Black and Minority Ethnic communities – Soteri Proctor 2011)
- the sharing of food and clothing (McCabe *et al* 2013) through to informal advice services
- the organisation of regular community events through to 'walking buses' on routes to and from schools
- housing 'care and repair' through to 'shared care schemes' with older people
- service user movements in mental health and learning disability through to house mosques and churches
- local history groups through to those involved in culturally specific celebrations of religious or other festivals and significant events in countries of origin
- groups campaigning for change through to those committed to maintaining the status quo.

The above list is by no means exhaustive. What is not captured, even in the more detailed, local, surveys, is what might be described as 'home based civil society': the reading or craft groups that meet in members houses rather than any public venue (see Soteri Proctor, Chapter 2). Further, these initiatives, more often than not, exist outside (or actively resist) attempts to formalise the informal through schemes such as Time Banks or the creation of local alternative currencies in (for example Brixton and Bristol).

What emerges is a rich tapestry of activity which '*may... either be marginal (from the economic perspective) or crucially important (from the voluntarism or social capital perspective)*' (Toepler, 2003, p.238).

A 'below the radar' sector?

In the US Toepler (2003), studying 'grassroots organisations' notes that traditional foundational theories of the non-profit sector have taken the twin failures of markets and governments as their starting point (Kalifon, 1991). Thus, it can be argued that third sector organisations exist as alternative providers of goods and services and bring added value in their capacity to innovate and reach particularly marginalised groups (Boateng, 2002). Alternatively others argue that very small VCOs may make very little contribution in this sphere where they are driven more by notions of solidarity, mutuality, and voluntary altruism than the provision of professionalized services (Barnes *et al.*, 2006).

Indeed, reflecting on the diverse below the radar activities listed above, what might be considered as a uniting feature of distinctive 'a community sector' is the importance of associational life (Gilchrist 2009). Yet, returning to the literature, what emerges is a series of reports and research papers not on 'a sector' but a series of subsectors.

There are, for example, literatures which are specific to:

The Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) sector: the literature argues that such groups are generally concerned with two main types of activity: filling gaps in public services where the mainstream has failed to meet needs, and cultural solidarity or identity (Sivanandan, 1982; Carey-Wood, 1997). Chouhan and Lusane (2004) found that BME VCOs often provided a range of specialist services for young people, older people and disabled people, including advice, health services (mental and physical) and welfare and income support. Others have noted that groups also play a role in community advocacy, campaigns for increased rights, anti-discrimination, and access to mainstream services (McLeod *et al* 2001). These studies focused upon the whole BME sector rather than simply BTR activity. Smaller BME groups focus less upon service provision and more on identity politics, social and cultural support. (McCabe *et al* 2013)

Faith Based Organisations: little research was undertaken on the role and function of religious/faith based social action (FBOs) until the late 1990s (Cnaan and Milofsky, 1997). FBOs, are characterised by their small scale and reliance on volunteers, with much activity happening in often un-consecrated and therefore 'unregistered' places of worship. Post events in America on 9/11 and in London on 7/7 there has been a growth in research into FBOs, though again this focuses of two dimensions – their role in the prevention of violent extremism (Allen 2010) or in addressing austerity and 'plugging the gaps' in welfare systems (Dinham 2012, McCabe *et al* 2016).

Tenants' and residents' groups: Many of the definitions of neighbourhood and residents groups incorporate BTR activity. Downs (1981, cited in Cnaan, 1991) identifies two types of neighbourhood based organisations, both with the primary aim of improving the quality of life of residents. The first incorporates any group (voluntary, public or for profit) operating within a neighbourhood and serving the interests of residents. Many of these will be 'on the radar' of housing providers and social landlords. The second includes neighbourhood representative organisations (NROs). These

are local, completely voluntary, managed by local residents and seeking to represent all residents. Many of them could be argued to operate BTR financially, if not in terms of campaigning profiles at the hyper-local level.

Voluntary Arts: Dodd *et al.* (2008) estimate that there are around 49,140 voluntary and amateur arts groups in England. Of these, it is unclear how many are 'below the radar'. Churchill *et al.* (2006) see the voluntary arts as a movement in which people take part voluntarily for enjoyment, community development, self-improvement and social networking. Activities are largely self-financed, run by dedicated volunteers who are passionate about one particular art form, and take place as societies, clubs, and classes. Little is known in research terms about the role of formal cultural and arts based organisations let alone BTR activities in this field. Indeed, Benns and Fox (2004) further sub-divide the types of voluntary and community groups into art forms and activities, craft, literature, performing arts, visual arts, and cross-form; finding that performing arts represented over two thirds of all groups in their study area of Dorset and Somerset.

Then, there is an even smaller, specific, literature on rural community groups (Grieve *et al.*, 2007). and community based sports associations (Sports Council 2002) which reflect the segmentation of research in this field.

Common Challenges

Whilst the existing literature tends to sub-divide small scale community groups into particular spheres of activity (e.g. housing), identity groups (e.g. Black and Minority Ethnic organisations) or settings (rural), there is considerable agreement on the challenges facing such groups – across their spheres of interest.

Common themes include:

Access to finance: there is a long established literature, both academic as well as local surveys, on the difficulties of accessing finance, particularly for smaller community based organisations – whether formally constituted or not. This stretches back to Rochester *et al* (2000), Kendall (2003) and Thompson (2008). Post 2008, and the financial crisis, and the Coalition administration's introduction of austerity measures, there has been a growing body of research into the impacts of cuts on the sector as a whole (Crees *et al* 2015, Hunter *et al* 2016). Smaller, particularly below the radar groups, may face a number of additional disadvantages in the current climate. Firstly, whilst there is an emphasis in increasing their role in service delivery, it has been argued that pre-qualifying questionnaires and the criteria outlined in invitations to tender, around annual turn-over, fully audited accounts etc., actually excludes them from the commissioning or procurement process (BVSC, 2009) and that the system favours larger, long established voluntaries (Kenny *et al* 2015). Secondly, such small groups may either be ignorant of statutory funding opportunities (Blackburn *et al.*, 2003) or fail to understand often complex eligibility criteria (Garry *et al.*, 2006). Thirdly, writing about refugee and migrant organisation, Lukes *et al.* (2009) make a point which may be more generally applicable to below the radar groups:

The current trend in funding arrangements is increasingly pushing MRCOs towards structuring along standard mainstream principles to increase their chances of securing

commissioned service delivery. This seems to create a dilemma for MRCOs since it is the case that, the more a MRCO becomes structured along mainstream standards the higher the likelihood that it erodes its nature and value as a grass-roots community initiative (p.1)

Much of the above research, however, applies to small voluntary organisations historically in receipt of some form of state funding – whether grants or the now defunct Area Based Initiatives monies. The experiences of unfunded community groups is qualitatively different. It may not be cuts to funding, per se, which threaten such groups but, for example, the loss of no or low-cost access to meeting places and increased difficulties in recruiting volunteers or accessing pro-bono advice (McCabe 2010). It is this multiplier effect which threatens such groups rather than the loss of any single funding source.

Policy and influence: A number of commentators have noted the lack of representation of BTR activities and organisations in policy arenas and the difficulties they have influencing policy. Thompson's (2008) research on small VCOs working in the children and young people's sector, noted the difficulties groups had trying to gain influence, for example one of their informants stated

'small voluntary organisations are not always invited to consultation sessions and only hear about them in a roundabout way – again these tend to be held during the week – even after school is very difficult for us' (p.19).

This, despite 'the Big Society' and localism, remains a central issue. Whilst successive governments have stressed the importance on community engagement in policy formation and delivery – and more recently on the concept of co-production (Stephens *et al* 2008) BTR groups are frequently excluded (deliberately or unconsciously) from expressing interests or exerting influence (Ishkanian and Szreter 2012 – see also Chapter 13)

Volunteers: the Big Society, localism and the transfer of public services is predicated on the assumption that volunteers, active citizens, are an infinite resource (Stott 2011). Yet, looking at longitudinal and social class data Mohan (2012) proposes that, over time, the 'pool' of voluntary activists is relatively stable and goes on to argue that those in poor communities are least likely to volunteer. Whilst this may be contested (depending on the definition of volunteering adopted) recent evidence indicates that small community groups are struggling to recruit and retain activists in the face of increasing levels of demand for, and the complexity of presenting needs faced by, their services (McCabe *et al* 2016)

Conclusions: some contested issues

This chapter has argued that 'below the radar' has been used in rather unprecise ways to describe small scale community activity. The realities are much more nuanced and complex. Indeed, just as the concept of community is contested (Hoggett 1997) so is the idea of below the radar and the role of small scale community groups and activities (Somerville 2011).

Community, and therefore, community groups is not simply a shorthand for 'good' – a harking back to a supposed golden era of voluntary-ism (Green 1993). Such groups can be exclusive and discriminatory as well as inclusive and liberating for participants. They can respond, at the local level, to the demands of a vocal minority at the cost of addressing the needs of the less powerful (Cooper 2008).

Further, the term 'below the radar' has the potential to be patronising. It is a top down categorisation adopted by researchers and policy makers rather than a term used by community groups themselves. It has been described as a deficit model of community action (McCabe and Phillimore 2009): such groups fail to grow and 'scale up' because they are poorly managed – rather than wishing to retain a highly local focus and rejecting expansion in favour of replication.

Nonetheless "below the radar" as a term has gained resonance in suggesting there is a group of organisations, activities and even actions that do share some common characteristics. As such this book is devoted to exploring different types of BTR activity and its role and function.

Much of the contestation about "below the radar" activity is located within a wider debate on the current and future position of the third sector as a whole. What should its role be in the delivery of public services? Is it anymore a 'sector', never mind a unified and independent sector (Milbourne and May 2014)? Have voluntary and community organisations simply become an arm of the state, delivering welfare and poor services for the poor? Do small scale groups have anything in common with large, multi-million pound, NGOs?

Most of the ongoing debate surrounds service delivery. Meade (2009 p124– see also Chapter 4) places this in a more politicised context, arguing that *'that state-funded NGOs are colonising the few political and discursive spaces that might otherwise accommodate more 'organic' social movements'*. The National Coalition for Independent Action (2015) and more radical social movements such as Occupy, would go further and argue that spaces for communities to engage in democratic processes, never mind on an equal basis, are being squeezed out and closed down.

In the continuing political environment of austerity, and one of rapid change within the third sector, it is increasingly important to develop a more nuanced understanding of the extent to which associational community activity mitigates (but does not fundamentally address) poverty and inequality or offer organic solutions to many of the social ills associated with recession and cuts in public spending. Will below the radar groups become co-opted by the state, and pushed towards, or actively collaborate with, formalisation in ways which prevent or inhibit grass roots community action (Dominelli 2006)? Will they retreat into single focus silos, addressing 'small' issues as societies problems are just 'too big' to even begin thinking about? Will they limit themselves to social and associational life activities or affirm Labonte's assertion (2005 p.89) that *'community groups transform the private troubles of support groups into public issues for policy remediation'*.

Reflective Exercises

Is the term 'below the radar' useful in describing, or understanding, small scale community groups and actions?

What is the role of below the radar activity in austere times: campaigning and lobbying for change, mitigating the impacts of poverty and inequality through delivering services or sustaining social relationships?

In the research literature, below the radar groups tend to be sub-divided into a series of sub-categories: sports groups, craft associations, faith based organisations, refugee and migrant community groups etc.? Such sub-divisions suggest that such groups have more differences than things they have in common. To what extent do you agree?

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